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ABSTRACT

By a careful chcice of minors or elective courses in college, the English major who shies away from teaching as a profession may equip himself with a unique set of skills, "marketable" in such diverse fields as advertising, public relaticns, journalism, publishing, library science, government and industry. Thus, he is insured economic security in one of the many "practical" professions. (MF)

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Whatcha Gonna Do? Teach?

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Picture the following scene: two high school seniors are waiting to have a conference with their guidance counselor. Both are going to the state university next fall, and they must schedule the numerous scholarship and entrance tests that have to be taken.

J.: "Whatcha gonna major in?"

B.: "English."

J.: "Whatcha gonna do? Teach?"

The temptation for me right now, being an English teacher, is to interrupt the above conversation and discourse on the virtues of teaching. Assuming that does not need to be done—again—let's proceed to the purpose at hand: to show that B. has made an excellent choice of major and that J.'s question, "Whatcha gonna do? Teach?" is the result of ignorance about the relationship of higher education and the world-after-college.

It isn't J.'s fault that he has asked a stereotyped question. He is only asking the same question asked by countless others in decades past when the truth was that a major in English led to few occupations other than teaching.

That truth has changed, and the change speaks well of those who have fought to change the image of English as a medieval search for dusty manuscripts carried on by persons living three centuries behind their times. On the other hand, it is perhaps the fault of these same persons that the wrong impression concerning the *practicality* of a major in English has been so firmly established.

Until recently, competent high school seniors and their parents have rejected concentration in English on this very basis of practicality: You can't earn a living with it and/because it's only for those who want to teach. (Teachers' salaries are, however, increasing faster than those in most other fields. On this basis, then, it *is* practical to *teach* English and is growing more practical annually.) The more current objections reflect the increased social maturity and awareness of today's young people (and their parents, who still must assume their established role of bill-payers). They claim English provides them with no skills they can market after four years. In other words, English doesn't tie in with the more "practical" areas of study. And, as if snubbing the pursuit of any subject on purely aesthetic grounds, they hold that English is not relevant to the problems they see in their contemporary society and that they want to spend their time preparing to work in a here-and-now world.

Credit the young people with accurate insight about our age. Having grown up with the realities and problems of increased automation, they take

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for granted the need to acquire a set of skills that will make them valuable —and to a degree indispensable—to a large company.

But they have the wrong idea about English.

Granted, our society is a highly "specialized" one; employment agencies inevitably list a much greater number of jobs for those with specialized training and education than for those without. But *every* job listed does not require such specialization. The Placement Office at Colorado State University, for example, distributes a company interviewing calendar, the current one showing that 10 percent of the companies coming to the campus will interview "language and communication" or "liberal arts" majors. This percentage is slightly higher than last year's. It reflects, it seems, the desire of businessmen to place in their ranks persons who are *un*specialized, yet flexible enough to work with people in specialized areas to increase the production and prestige of the company.

Given, then, the need in our society for alert citizens with a breadth of knowledge and urbane minds—a need manifested in the hiring practices of large companies—let me suggest that English is designed to produce just such a combination. What, specifically, might the companies be looking for?

In advertising, the need is explicit. Companies want persons who are literate and who can manipulate contemporary idiom, a skill that results from wide reading. Coupled with this is the need for an understanding of societal tradition and its relevance to today's human relations.

Public relations personnel are those who are aware of problems of motivation and response as they relate to "public image." Studying literature in depth initiates such awareness as well as supplying techniques for studying these concepts. Further, personnel (or, more broadly, "social") work involves an ability to articulate social problems. Much literature studied by English majors is, quite literally, the treatment of social problems. In close conjunction with this would be work in government. If much literature treats social problems, just as much deals with political problems—more specifically, the nature of the governed society. An English major thus becomes aware of the realities, motivations, and concerns of the political and social worlds.

The fields of publishing and journalism require most of the abilities listed above, particularly an intellectual and sophisticated understanding of the complexities of modern life (not readily available in most journalism or technical writing courses *per se*) as they are related to the dissemination of news and of literary and non-literary books. The merchandising and editing of books, magazines, newspapers, journals, etc., requires even more of such sophistication.

Couple all these needs of the business world with the additional ones generated by such fields as international relations, import and export, the Peace Corps, bi-national centers concerned with teaching English as a second language, and United States government agencies such as the U.S. Information Agency and the Agency for International Development, and you begin to see the possibilities for employment available to English majors, above and beyond teaching. It becomes obvious that, in addition to the hundreds of employees with specialized training, large companies

have great need for and do hire the unspecialized person who has a breadth of knowledge in various areas: the breadth attained by English majors as a matter of course.

But don't be deceived. English majors still have to "sell" themselves. As a matter of fact, they might have to work harder at selling themselves than would a narrowly specialized person. Further, the English major won't find his niche quite so easily nor is it quite so readily available as the one for the specialized person. But he can and does find highly satisfying and lucrative positions upon graduation, positions which can almost always lead to administrative responsibilities. In other words, he might not find his "drawing board" right away, but neither will he, most likely, have to tear himself away from that drawing board in ten years in order to advance.

If businesses have thus recognized the value of English/liberal arts majors in their companies, what can a high school senior, seriously interested in pursuing English, do in college to enhance his major so that his desirability and marketability are even greater?

Most colleges and universities recognize academic minors. Those that do not have official minors, along with the required courses in any major, allow for a relatively large number of "elective hours." Careful choice of a major or judicious planning of elective hours can produce the desired result. For example, take the following combinations and possible results.

1. An English major with a secretarial minor. Result: a literate and skilled person ready to assume jobs in publishing, advertising, government, public relations—possibly as administrative secretary (in some companies the term is "executive secretary").

2. An English major with secretarial training and a commercial art minor. Result: the same job areas as above, but the latitude (as well as the individual's value to a company) is increased.

3. An English major with secretarial training and business administration minor (or one in basic business procedures). Result: opportunities in personnel work, public relations, management.

4. An English major with a data processing minor. Result: A literate and skilled person equipped to work in communications research or as a liaison within large companies between research staff and management.

5. An English major with secretarial skills and a minor in political science. Result: administrative or consulting opportunities with government agencies, both home and abroad.

6. An English major with secretarial skills and a minor in foreign language. Result: opportunities in government, publishing, advertising, international import-export companies, the United Nations.

7. An English major with a school administration minor. Result: editorial and/or personnel opportunities in national education agencies and/or administrative roles in local school districts.

8. An English major with concentrations in both technical writing and basic science. Result: the skills necessary for success in industrial advertising and public relations work with technological corporations.

9. An English major with a library science minor (perhaps with special training in bookbinding or in the care of old and rare books). Result: a

choice of jobs in libraries throughout the country (more libraries have openings for librarians than universities have librarians graduating), especially in those libraries having large and growing collections of old and rare books.

10. An English major can often go on to train in one of the major professions. Medical schools increasingly ask their pre-professional students to take more liberal arts courses. And the University of Indiana has instituted a six-year program in English and law, resulting in two bachelor's degrees. Result: a "literary" lawyer who could assume a corporate attorney position in a major publishing firm.

The list of combinations could go on and on, combining the English major with minors in such areas as journalism, economics, history, psychology, outdoor recreation, consumer science, fashion merchandising and design, etc. The extent of such combinations is limited only by ingenuity and imagination. Each combination would equip a person with a slightly different set of skills. Each combination would make him "marketable" to various companies. The variety of combinations presented should make it clear to prospective English majors (and their parents) that they can pursue a major interest in English, they can pursue an ancillary interest as well, and, as a result, they will receive a set of skills that (a) need not be used in teaching (but easily could be); (b) prepare them to earn a comfortable living; and (c) demonstrate the connection English does, indeed, have with the "practical" areas of study. And it does not negate the aesthetic approach to the study of language and literature. It merely builds on it. It shows clearly the relevance that English, as studied in modern colleges and universities, does have to contemporary society. And it should satisfy the desire that young people have to prepare themselves for the here-and-now world.